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SUBJECT: WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO THE SUDAN PEOPLE'S INITIATIVE?

REF: A) KHARTOUM 1754  
B) KHARTOUM 1549  
C) KHARTOUM 1504

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Sudan People's Initiative (SPI) has been given a headquarters and some funding, but no mandate or support from GOS officials to implement its recommendations, Chairman of the SPI Drafting Committee Professor Atayeb Hajj Attia told CDA Fernandez in a meeting on February 5. While several leading, squabbling NCP figures continue to exert their influence on the Darfur portfolio, there is no clear leader among them and thus no clear Darfur policy, he said. He also stated that the impending ICC announcement has triggered a wave of internal machinations within the regime and essentially paralyzed any and all decision-making. Attia feared that the ICC would lead to the eventual downfall of President Bashir, and that with no clear successor this could easily lead to a total breakdown of the state apparatus and trigger regional conflict, a "somalization" of Sudan. He also warned of impending political and economic collapse in South Sudan, triggered by plunging oil revenues. Attia is a respected elder statesman of the academic community in Sudan and his observations deserve close attention. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On February 5 CDA Fernandez met with Professor Atayeb Hajj Attia, the Director of the Peace Research Center of the University of Khartoum who served as Chairman of the Drafting Committee at the Sudan People's Initiative (SPI) in Kenana (ref A). Attia expressed frustration that he was been unable to make real progress on implementing the SPI recommendations. "They gave me a nice building to serve as a headquarters, and a check to fund activities," he said. "But there is no process, and no point of contact. There's no one person [in the government] that you can talk to get anything done," he said, adding that (with the sole exception of VP Ali Osman Taha) it is impossible to consistently get any of the Ministers or Presidential Advisors on the phone. "They all shut off their mobiles and work in isolation," he remarked. Senior regime leaders seemed to be more concerned about NCP internal power struggles than progress in Darfur, he complained.

¶3. (SBU) Attia believes that the SPI process has stalled because of resistance from within the GOS. He noted that the various actors exerting influence on the Darfur portfolio (including Presidential Advisor Dr. Nafie Ali Nafie, Second Vice President Ali Osman Taha, NISS Chief Salah Ghosh, Defense Minister Abdelrahim Hussein, Finance Minister Awad al-Jaz) each have their reasons to withhold implementing the SPI recommendations. "Some feel they need to leave some cards on the table before talks in Doha," while others are still advocating for a military solution, he said. This lack of a clear policy is as much about internal NCP machinations as it is about lack of consensus, he said. The impending ICC announcement has put tremendous pressure on the regime and essentially paralyzed decision-making. "No one wants to take any initiative or propose concrete steps," because they are afraid of how it will affect their position in the current balance of power, he said.

14. (SBU) Though he has had doubts about continuing the uphill battle to implement the SPI recommendations, Attia told CDA that he remains committed to trying, hoping that he can leverage the Doha Peace talks to push forward the process. He is focused on grassroots issues--voluntary returns, tribal reconciliations, compensation and blood money--which can have tangible effects on the ground. "The big macro issues, we can leave to Doha," he said. Unfortunately, he added, the situation in Darfur is deteriorating rapidly, with an increasing polarization between (and inside) different tribes and rebel movements.

15. (SBU) Attia also told CDA that in his capacity at the Peace Research Center of the University of Khartoum, he is bringing together representatives of different political parties for closed-door discussions on how to ensure a "soft landing" in the wake of the ICC announcement. He hopes that a candid discussion of views will help avert a disaster, but he himself is not optimistic. "At some point, this country will be so weakened that Bashir will need to step down," he said, arguing that with no clear successor this could easily lead to a total breakdown of the state apparatus. "There are many actors who think that if the regime collapses, they can take over," he said. "But in reality, it's a huge hole that will cause the entire boat to sink." He noted that as the only African country bordering all three "conflict belts"--the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes, and the Sahel--Sudan had the potential to set off a chain reaction of violence that could propel much of Africa into chaos. Attia had just returned from Cairo where he described Egyptian officials as deeply concerned about the possible "somalization" of Sudan.

16. (SBU) To fend off this potential disaster, Attia urged CDA that the USG take strong, early steps and "widen its mandate" in Sudan.

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"You need a new comprehensive model, rather than just replacing the people at the top," he said. He advocated that the USG pursue strong and direct engagement with the GOS and exert "heavy pressure outside and inside, in cooperation with other international stakeholders," to further goals of peace and security. Without such action, the situation will likely deteriorate quickly, he said.

17. (SBU) Attia also sounded alarm bells about the political and economic crisis in South Sudan. The plunging oil revenues will reveal the weakness of the South's economy and political system within months, he said, warning that "a storm is coming." He noted that SPLM has in many ways adopted the worst practices of the NCP and is equally paralyzed in its decision-making. "The SPLM has learned more quickly than my brightest students," he joked. "Even their corruption practices are analogous to those of the NCP." He added that the former rebels of Sudan's Eastern Front, feeling betrayed by both the NCP and their former allies in the SPLM, are also deeply unhappy and talking about going back to fighting.

18. (SBU) Comment: Attia is one of the most respected political scientists in Sudan and we give some credibility to the gloomy views he expressed. The SPI represents the latest in empty promises and hollow spectacles put forth by the NCP regime. It also serves as an unwelcome reminder that the regime remains mostly unwilling--and perhaps more worryingly, unable--to take substantive and positive steps towards resolving the conflict in Darfur. If true, the paralysis of decision-making amongst the NCP leadership is likely to be exacerbated by the ICC indictment. And though Attia's fears of a total meltdown might be premature, strong engagement with the regime on the part of the USG and international community are the best hope for preventing further violence and chaos, not just in Darfur but in the rest of Sudan as well, especially the South.

FERNANDEZ